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COORDINATION QUESTIONS

# International cooperation in the field of information systems

## Report of the Secretary-General

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## INTRODUCTION

1. Commencing with its second regular session of 1991, the Economic and Social Council has adopted four resolutions (1991/70, 1992/60, 1993/56 and 1994/46) that have centred on the need to harmonize and improve United Nations informatics systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States. In resolution 1994/46, the Council reiterated the high priority it attached to the provision of easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access for States Members of the United Nations and for observers through, inter alia, their permanent missions, to the growing number of computerized databases and information systems and services of the United Nations. In the same resolution, the Council expressed concern about the limited progress achieved so far in the implementation of its resolutions 1991/70, 1992/60 and 1993/56.

2. The first follow-up report (E/1992/78) contained, inter alia, the resu of a questionnaire sent to all missions of Member States in New York and Geneva. The replies to the questionnaire identified the six most-requested categories of United Nations information: the full texts of documents, resolutions and treaties, press releases, bibliographic data and statistical data. In addition, the functions identified as those most in need of attention included the provision of user-friendly access to on-line information, training programmes for mission staff and coordination of informatics policy and implementation activities across the United Nations system of organizations.

3. In 1993, the report of the Secretary-General on this question (E/1993/ contained a summary of the activities of the organizations of the United Nations system that had been carried out to address the question of access to information, with particular emphasis on the six categories identified in the 1992 report. Training efforts, especially those of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), at Geneva, and the need for informatics policy coordination were also discussed briefly.

4. In 1994, the report of the Secretary-General (E/1994/98) contained a description of the various dissemination efforts in progress across the United Nations system of organizations. The structural change introduced at the inter-agency level to deal with informatics matters was also described (this change in the inter-agency mechanism, which resulted in the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS) being replaced by the Information Systems Coordination Committee (ISCC), was effected partially in response to the resolutions of the Council). Finally, the report noted the accelerated growth in Internet activities of organizations attempting to respond to the mandate of the Economic and Social Council to provide easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access to information

5. According to the four resolutions, the initial phases of the action programme to harmonize and improve United Nations informatics systems for optimal utilization and accessibility were to be accomplished within existin resources.

6. Since the adoption of Council resolution 1991/70, organizations of the United Nations system have been seriously concerned with complying with the above requests, the main obstacle to further progress being existing resource constraints. Because so much of the material of interest to Member States is contained in databases designed using older technologies, extensive database redesign is necessary. This is one of the activities being undertaken as part of the development of the United Nations Economic and Social Information System (UNESIS). The main objective of this project is to improve the quality and timeliness of the economic and social data that are collected and processed by the United Nations, including the regional commissions. However, activities of this nature are costly and time-consuming and require significant technical and personnel resources. The same applies to the manipulation of text material for on-line access. Even projects as seemingly straightforward as the production of compact disks (CD-ROMs) require extensive planning and preparation before the actual production of the disks themselves.

7. The United Nations system has, therefore, sought to take full advantage of a major technological shift - that is, the extraordinary expansion of the Internet, which is now encompassing more and more countries. The use of the Internet has permitted United Nations organizations to provide public access to information free of charge, continuously and globally, within the limits of existing resources. However, as is usually the case with the introduction of any major new technology, significant financial and personnel resources are required to establish, maintain and operate an Internet node. Computer hardware and software, including network security packages, must be acquired; technical personnel must be trained and need hands-on experience to become expert; personnel in substantive offices preparing and feeding material to the various Internet database servers also need training. The actual organization and loading of the information is itself time-consuming and demanding. The evolution and current status of the United Nations system's information services on the Internet are described in greater detail below.

## I. INTER-AGENCY ACTIVITIES

8. In April 1993, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) established a Senior Level Task Force to review and make recommendations on the general requirements for dissemination of information and the means of harmonizing United Nations information systems. In October 1993, the Task Force, after examining several alternatives for the network infrastructure needed for electronic access to United Nations information systems, recommended to ACC, inter alia, that Internet be used for access to and interconnection with the information services of United Nations organizations.

9. At its first session in March 1994, the Information Systems Coordination Committee, established on the recommendation of the Task Force to replace the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems, endorsed the above recommendation. It also recommended that all participating organizations proceed with interconnection to the Internet with dispatch, so as to complete the process by the end of 1994. At its second meeting, in October 1994, ISCC reviewed progress made in this direction and encouraged those agencies that wished to make their information available on the Internet, but did not have the means to do so, to consider using outside

facilities, such as the International Computing Centre (ICC). In order to enhance coordination at the inter-agency level, ISCC funded certain Internet activities at the Centre.

10. The ICC facility includes an electronic mail gateway, both "Gopher" and "World-Wide Web" access capabilities, and both private and public bulletin boards. In addition, the ICC Internet server contains or is planning to support information posted by several of the smaller agencies of the common system, obviating the need for each to acquire its own equipment and expertise.

11. Thus the International Computing Centre and the Information Systems Coordination Committee have taken a lead role in addressing the need for system-wide synchronization through what is known on the Internet as the "home page". (A home page is similar to the table of contents of a book. Usually, each World-Wide Web site has one main home page that is designed to be the entry point from which users can navigate to all other pages and documents within that site.) The ICC home page lists all the known official sources of United Nations information on the Internet with links to other servers. The objective of ICC is to create a consolidated United Nations system home page, a kind of "super home page", to enable users to access United Nations system information transparently, without the necessity of accessing a series of menus or home pages or of knowing where the information actually resides physically. Currently the ICC home page is in English, but French and Spanish will be available shortly and ICC is exploring the possibility of introducing Cyrillic. Future developments will include the addition of access by subject.

## II. ACTIVITIES OF INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATIONS

12. During the past year, considerable progress has been made system-wide in providing direct, on-line access to information relating to United Nations programmes and activities. The most prominent means has been through use of Internet services, especially the World-Wide Web, which offers a mixed media approach to information dissemination. A recent survey of the organizations of the United Nations system has revealed that there is now almost universal use of the Internet to address the information needs identified both by the Economic and Social Council and by their own governing bodies. In addition, the Internet is being used as a means to disseminate information to other interested parties and to the public at large. Many organizations indicated that they have mounted or were in the process of mounting both substantive information and operational data, for example press releases, appointment and vacancy announcements, meeting schedules and directories, on both internal and external Internet servers. The United Nations Office at Vienna recently broke new ground when it used the Internet for remote conference servicing of the United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held in Cairo in April/May 1995.

13. Connectivity to the on-line operating information of the various United Nations organizations and agencies has been a special concern of the missions of Member States in Geneva and New York (the annex contains examples of many of the services provided to missions in those cities). In Geneva, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has been especially active in providing this service. Through the facilities of its Telecommunications

Information Exchange Services (TIES), ITU has enabled more than 35 missions to avail themselves of a set of networked information resources, such as electronic mail, access to the ITU Gopher and World-Wide Web servers and access to both public and private bulletin boards. The Web services are particularly important, as they provide a consistent and user-friendly interface. ICC also provides Internet facilities to missions. In particular, ICC has developed a software package that allows dial-up access to its services, including Internet.

14. In New York, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has provided connectivity to its Internet server at the request of more than 50 missions. These services include electronic mail and access to Web and Gopher services. As is the case with ITU at Geneva, UNDP provides the installation of connectivity software, training and help desk services.

15. Among the many Internet projects reported are the following:

(a) While the United Nations Optical Disk System (ODS) cannot yet be reached through an Internet link, it is expected that a link will be operational early in 1996. At the present time, 50 missions in New York and Geneva have been registered to use the ODS via direct dial-in;

(b) Multilateral Treaties Deposited with the Secretary-General, issued annually by the Office of Legal Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, will be available on the World-Wide Web later in 1995;

(c) The Department of Public Information (DPI) of the United Nations Secretariat, in collaboration with the Electronic Services Division, is mounting on the United Nations Web server special presentations that include both visual and audio material relating to the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations. In addition, the Department is making a continuous effort to make available on the UNDP Gopher facility the texts of important United Nations documents, such as press releases, Security Council documents and resolutions, the United Nations daily journal, statements of the Secretary-General and reports relating to peace-keeping operations. The Department plans to reformat the material and transmit it on the United Nations Web server;

(d) By September, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) expects to be able to provide member States and other potential users with access to its information resources through the Internet network. ECLAC is developing an experimental home page for the World-Wide Web that will allow it to make abstracts and the full texts of documents available on-line;

(e) UNDP has created a section on its Gopher server for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), which contains substantive documents on African development produced by the ECA secretariat. In addition, documents submitted to the 1994 Dakar Conference on Women and Development and documents produced by the ECA Population Division are posted. ECA has also made an arrangement with the University of Pennsylvania to mount full-text copies of important ECA documents on its Web server;

(f) The United Nations Office at Vienna offers two examples of the use of Internet facilities outside the United Nations system of organizations. In 1994, assisted by the University of Vienna, the United Nations Office at Vienna established an on-line service for the secretariat of the International Year of the Family, and the Office of Outer Space currently has posted some of its reference material on the Internet system maintained by the European Space Office in Germany;

(g) The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is widening access to REFWORLD, a collection of databases on refugee issues, by installing the material on a Gopher server as well as by producing it on a CD-ROM.

(h) Funded by the United Nations Population Fund and implemented by the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis of the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations Population Information Network (POPIN) is an electronic collection of population journals and newsletters, bibliographic and demographic databanks, statistical tables and other resources. It includes United Nations documents about population issues, including those issued in connection with the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. It is available through the Internet and was used by over 28,000 people worldwide during the Conference;

(i) The World Health Organization has put its mortality database, press releases, selected newsletters, selected statistical data, programme information and an extensive bibliographic database, including abstracts on its Internet server;

(j) The International Atomic Energy Agency has made access to the International Nuclear Information System and the Nuclear Data System available through the Internet;

(k) The International Maritime Organization is investigating the possibility of making its bibliographic database available on the Internet using the facilities of ICC;

(l) The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is developing facilities to permit access to statistical information, FAOSTAT, on the Internet. A text component, FAOINFO, is already available on an Internet Gopher server, and there are plans to extend the range of topics. FAO also envisages making the data available in a more sophisticated format on the World-Wide Web in the near future.

16. The phenomenal growth in the number of Internet users will continue, in particular among permanent missions and other governmental entities within Member States. The Internet is intrinsically complex in so far as it contains a wide range of services, for example bulletin boards, electronic mail and Gopher databases, which are not intuitively obvious to use. While the World-Wide Web is user-friendly, the preparation of material to mount on a Web database is difficult and requires special tools and skills.

17. Because of its inherent complexity and in order to encourage increased utilization of Internet facilities awareness and training programmes are

needed continuously. At Geneva, both ITU and ICC have undertaken to train members of the Geneva-based missions in Internet access methods. In addition, both organizations provide help-desk services, including initial installation of software, initial training and remote trouble shooting. In New York, these services have been provided in large part by UNDP. While these organizations have managed to supply such services within current funding limitations, additional resources will be required in order to extend help-desk services to the full complement of missions in both cities.

18. Achieving the goal of providing easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access to United Nations computerized databases and information services and systems is a continuous challenge. It is clear from the examples cited above that United Nations organizations have been expending considerable effort to make electronic information available on-line and these efforts will be continuing in the context of the regular programmes of the various organizations as part of a system-wide phased plan, based on standards and guidelines being developed by ISCC.

19. In an area as important as information technology, a coordinated and consistent approach, which both provides for cost-effective solutions and is responsive to newly identified requirements, should be taken throughout the United Nations common system. While each organization is responsible for implementing its own technological infrastructure and making information available online to Member States, changes that occur in one organization often have an impact on the whole system. There should thus continue to be a shared sense of the enhanced level of information technology that is appropriate to the system as a whole. The Administrative Committee on Coordination, through its Information Systems Coordination Committee, will continue to work in this direction, so as to continuously enhance the collective responsiveness of organizations to the requirements of Member States.

Annex

**EXAMPLES OF ACCESS SERVICES PROVIDED DIRECTLY TO MISSIONS**

New York

(a) Direct dial-in to the Optical Disk system, for full text retrieval of documents, resolutions and so forth;

(b) Access to Internet facilities, via UNDP and/or United Nations dedicated servers. Services available include electronic mail and information on the Gopher and World-Wide Web servers;

(c) Access to the United Nations electronic mail facility;

(d) Direct dial-in to the United Nations mainframe facility for access to the UNBIS bibliographic database system;

(e) Access to the research and reference facilities of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library;

(f) Briefings and training sessions provided to permanent mission personnel by staff of the Office of Conference and Support Services, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and UNDP;

(g) Some help-desk support provided by the Electronic Services Division and UNDP.

Geneva

(a) Access to Internet facilities, via the International Telecommunication Union TIES system and/or the International Computing Centre. Services available include electronic mail, Gopher and World-Wide Web;

(b) Direct dial-in to the Optical Disk system of the United Nations Office at Geneva for full text retrieval of documents, resolutions and so forth;

(c) Briefings and training sessions provided by UNITAR, ITU and ICC;

(d) Direct dial-in to on-line information, such as UNBIS, on the ICC mainframe;

(e) Access to the research and reference facilities of the libraries of the organizations of the United Nations system at Geneva;

(f) Help-desk support provided by ITU.

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